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Metropolis in black and white - the art of Percy Benison

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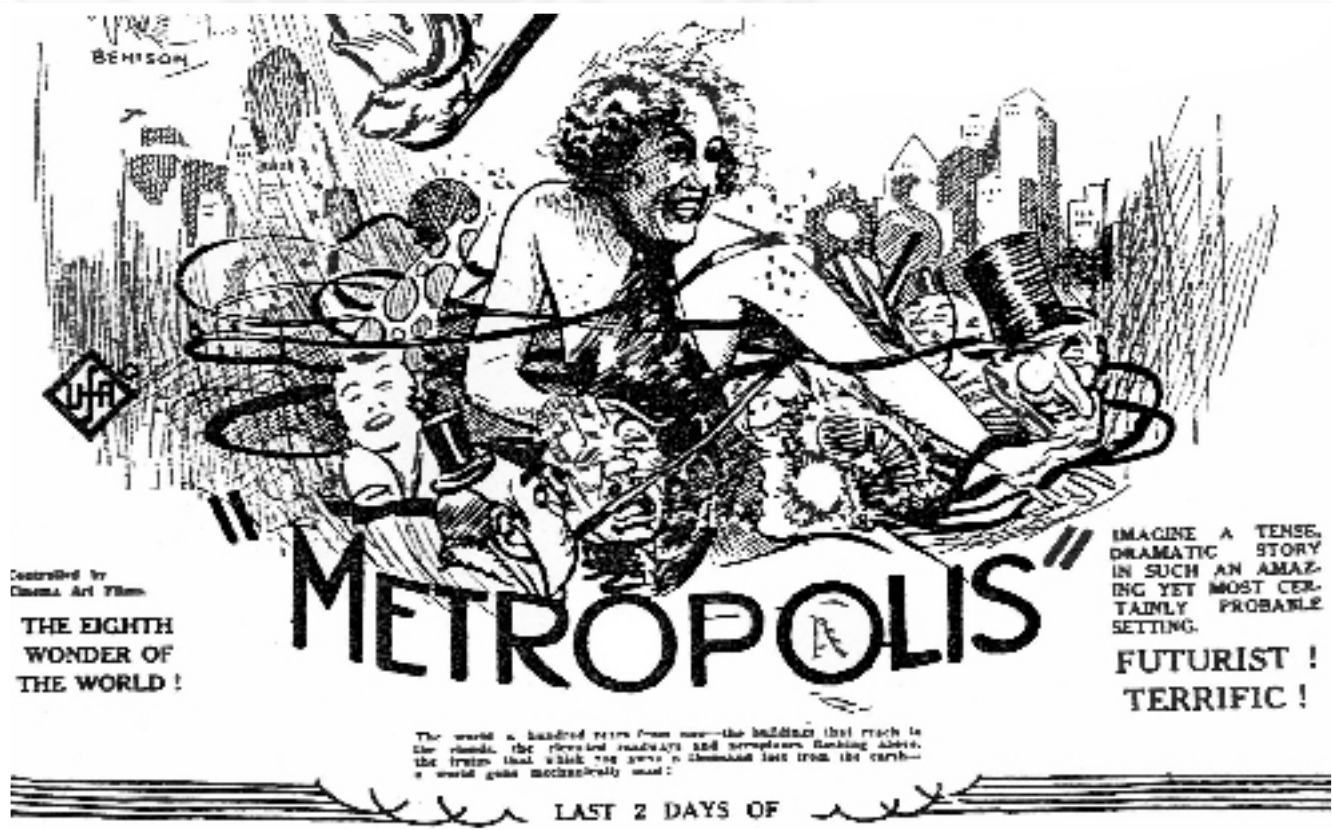
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The Art of Percy Benison

The initial four-week Sydney and Melbourne seasons were marked by

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record-breaking crowds and a continuing flurry of promotional activity and comment.³ In Sydney, *Metropolis* ran with Charlie Chaplin's six-reel comedy *The Circus*, in a double-bill proclaimed 'the most stupendous program in the history of any theatre in Australia'.⁴ The then new Regent Theatre, managed by F.W. Thring, was able to attract on average 50,000 Sydneysiders a week to this strange marriage of slapstick comedy and science fiction spectacle. The audience was presented with stunning tinted visuals on 35mm nitrate film, and a cacophony of sound from producer Byron Bidwell's orchestra and sound effects team. The thirty-two different effects included high explosives, a shot gun, steam whistles, three men lifting and dropping heavy chains on an iron sheet, tympani, gongs struck with steel hammers, bricks thundering down a narrow chute, and the banging of drums over the roar of a Wurlitzer.⁵

In Melbourne, *Metropolis* was the star attraction, accompanied only by a stage production entitled 1928, featuring twenty artists and a full orchestra.

The local trade journal *Everyone's* noted that after four weeks *Metropolis* was 'still pulling phenomenal business' in Melbourne, prior to moving on to the other capitals.⁶

Reviews were generally good, with comments such as:

Unlike any film so far screened ... Remarkable for wonderful photography, excellent acting, and an exceedingly gripping story ... Probably the finest film yet shown in Melbourne ... An impersonal and intellectual triumph ... The ultimate in screen wizardry.⁷

Print advertisements in both cities combined a mixture of UFA-sourced posters and stills with local material, though there were distinct differences between Sydney and Melbourne. The Victorian newspaper and trade magazine campaign was grim, emphasizing the theme of worker revolution and calling upon the citizens of Melbourne to experience

life in the city in the year 2028, and look upon the future of work.⁸ In Sydney there was a decidedly lighter tone, featuring the often comic and fanciful black and white artwork of 'Benison', 'John P. Davis' and 'SS'.

One line drawing by 'SS' portrayed a bejewelled vamp alongside a stiffly saluting female robot, somewhat eerily foreshadowing the goose-stepping Nazi battalions that would overrun Germany a decade later.⁹ But by far the largest number of original works – nine in total – were by 'Benison' and appeared



Benison's robot possesses an uncanny modernity, resting more easily in the anime tradition.

in Sydney's *Sun*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Evening News* throughout April.

Uncanny Modernity

'Benison' was Percy Benison (1881–1972), a well-known commercial artist whose line and wash drawings had, since the turn of the century, graced the pages of Melbourne and Sydney newspapers and magazines such as *The Bulletin*, *Table Talk* and *The Lone Hand*. Benison's work was lively and cartoonish, bright and optimistic. It was distinguished by a fine draughtsmanship much in the style of Norman Lindsay, Livingston 'Hop' Hopkins and B.E. Minns, all of whom had attained widespread popularity through their work in *The Bulletin* from the 1880s through to the 1920s.

Benison's *Metropolis* advertisements in

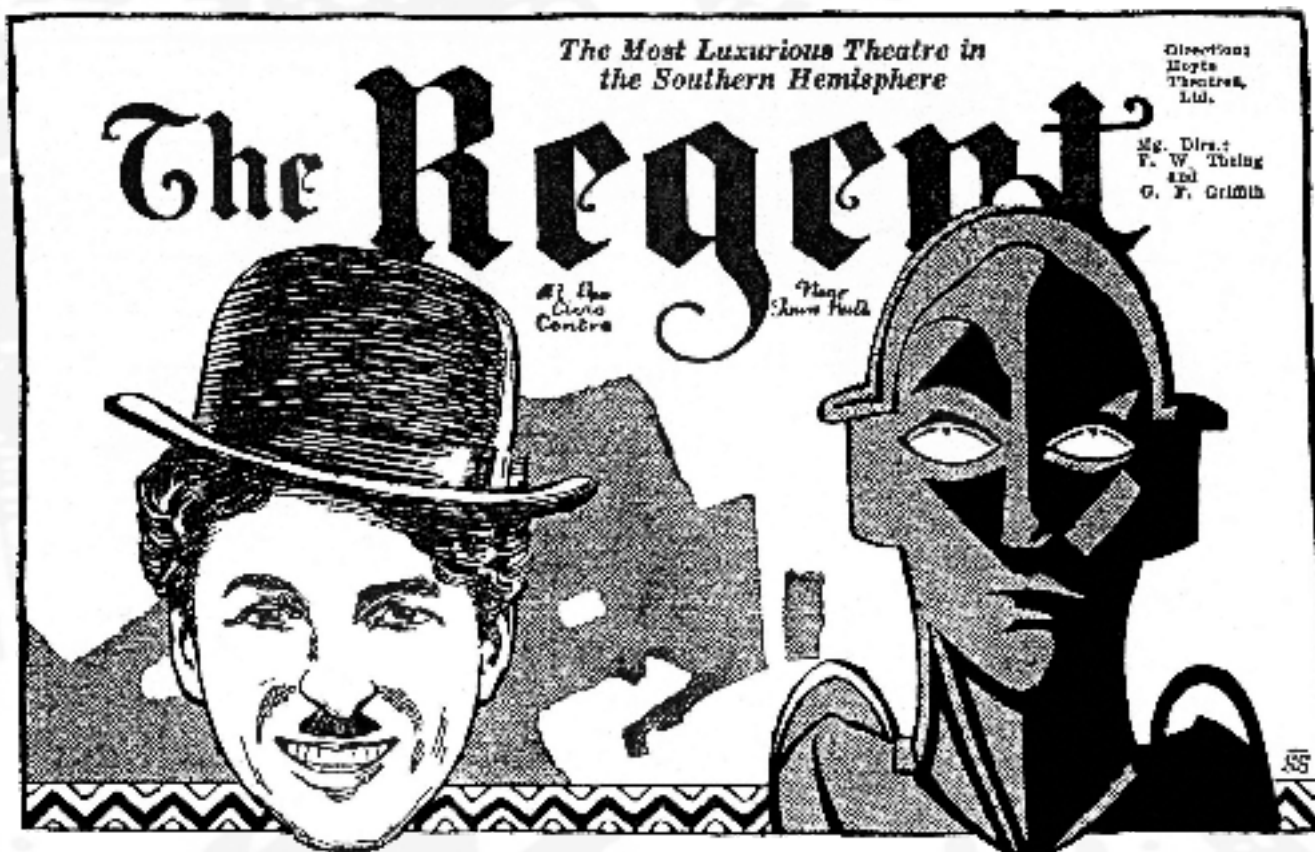
Sydney's *Sun* were especially striking. One featured the menacing figure and bulging eyes of the half-crazed proto-'mad scientist' Rotwang, his hands hovering with electricity over the naked and comatose body of the heroine Maria in a transformation tube.¹⁰ Benison's drawing, like Lang's film, came many years before audiences first encountered that other well-known crazed scientist, Dr Victor Frankenstein, brought to life by Colin Clive in Tod Browning's *Frankenstein* (1931). Boris Karloff's crude and brutal monster is the antithesis of the beautifully seductive robotic creation of Rotwang, who was realized in a piece of filmmaking which continues to amaze.

In both *Frankenstein* and *Metropolis*, audiences were treated to laboratories alive with arcing electricity, bubbling liquids and strange, medieval equipment able to manipulate the life force, in one instance bringing life to a cold cadaver, whilst in the other transferring it from a young woman to a machine.

Rudolf Klein-Rogge's Rotwang was reborn as Peter Sellers' magnificently malignant Dr. Strangelove in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove: Or, How I Learnt to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). Both characterizations featured a black-gloved hand masking damaged limbs, the result of ethically suspect experimentation. Whilst Rotwang's glove is known to have hidden an artificial hand, the tortured Strangelove's problematic appendage remains shrouded in mystery.

With Melbourne promoting the social and political elements of *Metropolis*, Benison and his Sydney colleagues highlighted the sensational, with motifs such as a the killer machine-woman on the loose in the city, the crazed scientist at work, and the lascivious vamp enticing unwary workers to their doom.

From this wondrous array of imagery, Benison produced an extraordinary drawing of the Futura robot – 'the Robot Woman, the mechanical thing science dreams of – a living, walking, working being – minus a soul!'¹¹ Appearing beneath a simple head portrait of Charlie Chaplin and a couple of frolicking circus creatures, it portrayed a dramatic and dynamic female robot, thrusting a fist into the air as she stood poised to leap into the void.



From a present-day perspective this is an incongruous image, out of place in a 1928 Sydney daily newspaper. Benison's robot possesses an uncanny modernity, resting more easily within the Japanese Anime tradition of the 1960s, made famous by artists such as Osamu Tezuka, originator of Astro Boy and Gigantor. Tezuka's first major graphic novel was *Metropolis* (1949), based upon Fritz Lang's 1927 film and released as an animated feature in 2001.¹² It was from Tezuka's *Metropolis* that Astro Boy evolved, and from both we see the antecedents of modern works such as Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* (1988).

The Definitive Science Fiction Film

The term robot, derived from the Czech word for forced labour, was first used in Karel Capek's 1920 play *R.U.R.* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*). However, it was Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* that initially popularized the idea.¹³

Lang did not make reference to the word, using instead 'machine-person' throughout the film's original intertitles.

Benison's robot was created at a time

when the science fiction genre was in its infancy and the term 'sci-fi' was yet to be coined. It was a period which David Kyle has called the Golden Years of science-fiction illustration.¹⁴ Hugo Gernsbeck's monthly magazine *Amazing Stories* first appeared in 1926, featuring illustrated stories by Jules Verne, H.G. Wells and Edgar Allen Poe. Newsstands thereafter bristled with accounts and images of time travel, voyages to the stars, encounters with extra-terrestrials and visions of future societies where robots and cyborgs either served humankind or engaged in violent rebellion. Science fiction and fantasy featured in filmmaking from the earliest days, most notably in the short films of French director George Méliès. But *Metropolis* was a breakthrough film, the first of its kind to be produced on such a grand scale and to have a worldwide impact.

The deficiencies of its script were overcome by the stunning visuals and technical innovations introduced by Lang and his team. The robot transformation scene remains a landmark in filmmaking, whilst Lang's portrayal of high-rise cityscapes has reverberated down the years in movies such as *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), *The Fifth Element*

(Luc Besson, 1997) and *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (Kerry Conran, 2004).

Benison did not limit himself in his art to the elements of science, machinery and skyscrapers that were such an integral part of *Metropolis*. He portrayed the evil Maria as a typical 1920s vamp, revealing his obvious enjoyment of the female form and continuing on from his work with *The Lone Hand* a decade earlier.¹⁵

Graphic Artists in Australia

Benison's suite of *Metropolis* drawings reveals the workings of a commercial artist during a period when cinema was a major source of public entertainment in Australia and picture palaces were experiencing record-high attendance rates. Australia's cinemas were at this time dominated by American features, and films were accompanied by posters, press books, stills, lobby cards, magazines and ephemera.

Whereas during this period countries such as Germany, France, Russia, Argentina and to a lesser extent the United States, featured the work of well-known artists in such promotional material, the

situation was different in Australia. There were only a few firms producing local features, and likewise a small number in the business of printing movie posters. In Sydney during the 1920s these included Swift Print, John Evans & Sons, Marchant & Co., Simmons and W.E. Smith.¹⁶

These local printers often simply copied the original artwork provided by the overseas production houses. Print runs in Australia were small, and low numbers meant low turnover, thereby limiting the opportunity for artists to earn a regular income from such work. Cheap, quickly produced lithographic copies of overseas posters appear to have been the norm, and this trend continued right through to the 1970s. Movie posters bearing the original work of local artists did appear but they were the exception rather than the rule, and the large independent or studio-based print operations that developed overseas and employed full-time a coterie of artists failed to materialize to any significant degree in Australia.

During the years between the wars, artists such as Percy Benison looked to magazines *The Bulletin* and *Smith's Weekly*, and newspapers *The Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney and the *Herald* in Melbourne, among others, to provide ongoing work. This often presented itself in the form of political and juvenile cartoons and advertising spreads, and it is here that some of the best Australian black and white art from the period can be found.

Whilst a number of historical studies have appeared on this subject, they have largely ignored cinema advertising, even though it was one of the earliest forms of graphic art to regularly appear in newspapers throughout the country.¹⁷ Cinema black and white art has been placed somewhere in amongst the political commentary of the feature cartoon, the juvenile comic strips which became popular during the 1920s, and straightforward commercial advertising layouts. It is none of these, though there are clearly elements of all within the best examples.

Those drawings that promoted the Australian release of *Metropolis* in 1928 point to the variety and originality of

such work, and to the influence of artists such as Norman Lindsay and Hop. Percy Benison represents the second generation of the black and white brigade, and his personal background reflects both an adventurous spirit and professional versatility.

A Man of Varied Passions and Talents

Born at sea en route to Australia in 1881, Benison spent his early years in Victoria. With a natural talent for drawing, he had his first work published in *The Bulletin* magazine during 1901, and by 1905 was employed as a political cartoonist for Melbourne's glossy *Table Talk*. Throughout the 1910s, his black and white cartoons and line drawings appeared in magazines such as *The Lone Hand*. He was also a costume designer for the Bijou theatre and worked with J.C. Williamson. Following a move to Sydney around the time of the First World War, Benison continued to work as a commercial artist and in the field of advertising.

A man of varied passions and talents, during the 1920s he managed local boxing championships and for three years was a boxing commentator and interviewer for radio station 2BL. It was during this period that he also worked on cinema advertising, with his graphic art appearing in newspapers around the country.

Between 1930 and 1939, Benison was advertising manager for the firm of Richard Hudnut & William R. Warner, specializing in producing beauty pageants and medical products. Benison brought numerous skills to the firm, amongst them his experience in judging beauty pageants since 1927.

During the Second World War he was a member of the Army Censorship Board, and he later branched out from advertising work and caricatures to fully developed cartoon strips, compiling the *Billy Koala* strip for Sydney's *Sun Herald* and *Blackie* for the afternoon daily *Mirror*.

As an active commercial artist, he was at various stages secretary of the Commercial Artists Association of Victoria, president of the Commercial Artists Association of New South Wales, and a member of the Newspaper Cartoonists Association of New South Wales. He

was also a producer for the Sydney Operatic Society. In the 1940s and 1950s, Benison worked for John Fairfax and Sons, producing cartoons, drawings and advertising material.

Percy Benison died at Cammarry, Sydney on 17 March 1972. A collection of his papers, drawings and published material can be found in the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.¹⁸

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Endnotes

- ¹ Thea von Harbou, *Metropolis*, Readers Library Publishing Co., London, 1927.
- ² *The Sun*, Sydney, 9 & 13 April 1928; *Herald*, Melbourne, 7, 9 & 20 April 1928.
- ³ *Everyone's*, 25 April, 30 May & 6 June 1928.
- ⁴ *The Sun*, Sydney, 8 April 1928. *The Circus* received top billing, though reviews favoured *Metropolis*.
- ⁵ 'Babel – Behind the Scenes', *Everyone's*, 18 April 1928.
- ⁶ *Everyone's*, 25 April 1928.
- ⁷ *Herald*, Melbourne, 13 April 1928.
- ⁸ *Everyone's*, 25 April 1928.
- ⁹ *Evening News*, Sydney, 4 May 1928.
- ¹⁰ *The Sun*, 11 April 1928.
- ¹¹ *The Sun*, 13 April 1928.
- ¹² *Metropolis*, Tezuka Productions, 2001.
- ¹³ David Pringle, *The Ultimate Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*, Carlton, London, 1977.
- ¹⁴ David Kyle, *A Pictorial History of Science Fiction*, Hamlyn, London, 1976.
- ¹⁵ Percy Benison, 'A Comparison – The Melbourne Girl: The Sydney Girl', *The Lone Hand*, 2 December 1912; 'Girls – The Girls They Left Behind Them', *The Lone Hand*, 1 December 1914.
- ¹⁶ John Reid, 'Australian Movie Posters', <http://www.moviemem.com/about.html> & Michael Organ, 'Australian Film Posters and Printers', <http://www.michaelorgan.org.au/posters1.htm> Accessed 22 & 24 June 2005.
- ¹⁷ Vane Lindsay, *The Inked-in Image – A Social and Historical Survey of Australian Comic Art*, Hutchinson, Melbourne, 1979; Joan Kerr, *Artists and Cartoonists in Black and White: The Most Public Art*, S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney, 1999; *50 Years of the Newspaper Cartoon in Australia*, Art Gallery of South Australia and *The Adelaide News*, Adelaide, 1973.
- ¹⁸ Percy Benison Papers, 1901–1972, ML MSS 651 and ML MSS 5758, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

